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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Vietnam Strategy

*not sent to President*

1. I recently called together twelve of my most senior, experienced officers who deal full time with Vietnamese affairs for a general discussion of the current situation in Vietnam and the implications of current developments. Though my associates differed among themselves on many matters of detail, they were unanimous in their belief that there is an urgent need for a comprehensive, carefully thought out, over-all US strategic plan for Vietnam, a plan which can integrate our thinking on all aspects of the struggle (military, political, psychological and diplomatic), pinpoint necessary tasks, clarify priorities, and sharpen our appreciation of both GVN and allied performance benchmarks essential to the attainment of over-all US objectives.
2. My associates were equally unanimous in the opinion that the immediate task at hand, a task which obviously cannot await the completion of any planning exercise, is the military stabilization of the situation: cleaning VC remnants out of the cities, preventing further urban attacks, dispersing VC forces in immediate proximity to urban areas, holding the line at Khe Sanh, in northern I Corps, in western II Corps, and in other threatened areas. These immediate tasks are well appreciated and are being energetically addressed by General Westmoreland and his able military colleagues. My associates believe, however, that it is none too soon to begin facing the questions that will be confronting us once our current military operations have succeeded.

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3. There have been many excellent statements by you yourself, by Secretary Rusk, and by other senior government officials outlining the rationale for US involvement in Vietnam and the reasons why that involvement is in our national interest. You and your senior subordinates have also clearly outlined what it is we are trying to achieve in Vietnam, i. e., our objectives: to halt Communist aggression, to induce Hanoi to leave its neighbors alone, to enable the South Vietnamese people to make their own free choices on matters affecting their political future without having those choices dictated by force of externally directed arms. To our knowledge, however, there does not now exist anywhere in the US Government an integrated strategic plan outlining the sequential steps and resource applications through which we intend to achieve our objectives and the interim developments on the ground in South Vietnam which must be realized if those objectives are indeed to be achieved.

4. Our Communist adversaries engage constantly in strategic planning and though their plans often embody elements of wishful thinking and are invariably expressed in turgid, doctrinal rhetoric, these planning exercises do give our adversaries useful benchmarks against which to measure their progress, allocate their tasks, and economize to achieve maximum integrated impact of their commitment of resources. Our adversaries' objective is simple: to acquire political control over South Vietnam. Their present broad strategy for achieving that objective involves the employment of armed force in a "war of national liberation." Their strategic thinking is dominated by an attitude succinctly summarized by

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General Giap in a 1955 interview he gave to Paris Match: " . . . For a Marxist, strategy is above all politics." Analysis of documents, prisoner interrogations and other available evidence indicates that the enemy's immediate strategic objectives are fairly simple and precise:

(1) To enforce maximum dispersion of GVN and allied military forces to maximize Communist freedom of action.

(2) To gain maximum access to the population of South Vietnam to utilize the population as a source of Communist support and deny it to the Saigon government.

(3) To exert maximum pressure on the GVN's military and civil structure in order to erode the ability of that military and civil structure to function and, in particular, to erode popular confidence in the GVN's military and civil capabilities.

(4) To inflict the maximum possible politically embarrassing casualties on U.S. Forces and the maximum possible politically embarrassing frustration of U.S. or U.S.-sponsored programs in order to increase domestic and international political pressures on the U.S. government to settle the war on any terms, i.e., on terms favorable to the achievement of the Communist objective of political control over South Vietnam.

5. Our overall strategy, in many ways, is much less precise and more diffuse than that of our adversaries. Militarily we have a strategy of attrition designed to inflict losses on the enemy cumulatively capable of undermining his capability and his appetite for continuing the struggle. Such an attritional strategy

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has worked many times in the past, most notably in our own civil war. But Lee's resources, in the context of that struggle, were decidedly finite. My associates believe that within the context of the Vietnam struggle, the Vietnamese Communists' resources may not be sufficiently finite, particularly since the fanatic Communist leadership, which is not responsible to an electorate, can incur losses in pursuit of political objectives (and has done so several times in the last two decades) that no elected government could survive.

6. It is certainly not this Agency's function to advise on military strategy, nor is it our function to advise on political strategy. My associates most experienced in and professionally concerned with Vietnamese matters <sup>believe</sup> that our immediate, paramount strategic objectives should include denying the Viet Cong access to the population of South Vietnam and developing certain minimum threshold performance levels on the part of the GVN's civil and military apparatus. I am not writing, however, to advocate or recommend any particular strategic doctrine. What I do want to suggest for your consideration is the advisability of convening on appropriate task force to develop a comprehensive U.S. strategy to guide us during the weeks and months ahead. A well thought out, integrated strategic plan would not only facilitate the consideration of policy decisions but, even more, would help all of us implement your decisions with maximum efficiency and effectiveness and, at the same time, give us a better gauge than any now available for measuring the progress made in carrying out your orders.

Richard Helms  
Director

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